Becoming Natives of Literature: Towards an Ontology of the Mimetic Game (Lévi-Strauss, Costa Lima, Viveiros de Castro, and the Nambikwara Art Lesson)

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Abstract  This essay establishes links between literary theory and contemporary ethno-anthropology. The first part proposes to rethink the notion of fiction through the use of Amerindian concepts. Reconsidering ‘The Writing Lesson’ from Tristes Tropiques, the second part of this essay rereads the Indigenous lesson not as a farce, but as an artistic force. This reading is developed through an analogy between Luiz Costa Lima’s notion of mimesis, understood not as ‘imitation’ but as a production of differences, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian notion of the ‘symbolic economy of alterity’. My hypothesis is that the Indigenous wavy lines can be read as the degree zero of the fictional game, revealing the aural and performative structure of what we call fiction.

Proof that inadequate, even childish measures, may serve to rescue one from peril.

(Kafka 1958: 89)

Introduction

This text seeks to read a certain silence, to say that silence in words and, perhaps, engineer the possibility of hearing it. As Jean-Luc Nancy asks in À L’écoute (2002), is Western thought capable of hearing? Or, as he proposes, is it necessary to invent an ontology of listening based on the reverberant relationship of our body with its surroundings? Michelle Boulous Walker pursues a similar question in her book Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence (1998). As the title of its first chapter suggests, reading silence also includes the possibility of ‘Speaking Silence’ (and, I would add, of hearing silence). The silence that I want to read (or to hear) is precisely, as I intend to show, a speaking silence, and it was produced by an indigenous chief of the Amazonian Nambikwara tribe.

In 1938, the Nambikwara indigenous chief drew some lines on a piece of paper in front of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. These lines reproduced the gesture of writing without creating a text: it was simply a group of wavy traces on a piece of paper. As is well known, Lévi-Strauss interpreted
these lines magnificently in the ‘Writing Lesson’ chapter of *Tristes tropiques* (1992 [1955]), and, twelve years later, Jacques Derrida violently counter-interpreted Lévi-Strauss’ interpretation in his book *De la grammatologie* (1998 [1967]). The attack was so violent that Lévi-Strauss, in his response, said that Derrida had written his critique with the ‘delicacy of a bear’.¹ Nonetheless, in spite of their huge opposition, both authors interpreted the Nambikwara lines in order to criticize their own culture of origin. Using differing strategies, their aim was to criticize European colonial domination, in Lévi-Strauss’s case, or the dominant European metaphysics, in Derrida’s text. But what about the Nambikwara indigenous chief’s point of view? There is a sense in which neither Lévi-Strauss nor Derrida actually read the markings made by the chief. Neither read the silence of the scrawl as a counter-text in relation to Western writing, so the tracings on the page continue to be an enigma – a kind of Nambikwara virtual hieroglyphics. As there is no material vestige of these lines on the page – since this writing, after all, was not preserved with other indigenous objects taken by Lévi-Strauss to the *Musée de l’Homme* in Paris – what we know about them is related to Lévi-Strauss’s and Derrida’s interpretations, in spite of the fact that, simultaneously, their enigma continues to reverberate as an open-ended question.

Indeed, the origin of structuralism is linked to the encounter between Lévi-Strauss and the Nambikwaras, which occurred during his longest trip into the field between June and September 1938. The trip provided him with the theoretical basis for his first book, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), as well as earlier articles and his 1948 work *Family and Social Life of the Nambikwara Indians* (Souza and Fausto 2004: 90–91). Similarly, it could be said that Derridean post-structuralism derives from a radical revision of that same meeting between the anthropologist and the Nambikwara indigenous people. But the question that remains open in our post-structuralist and post-deconstructionist moment, what remains to be thought (and to be listened to), is precisely the indigenous point of view regarding those lines on the page. The possibility of thinking philosophically about this unthought knowledge has finally begun to be realized through the revisioning of Lévi-Strauss’s thought alongside the emergence of indigenous concepts in the work of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as well as that of other ethnographers who have begun to translate Amerindian thought in philosophical terms.²

Inspired by that new anthropology and relating it to literary theory, especially Luiz Costa Lima’s re-visioning of the concept of mimesis, in this essay I propose re-reading the Nambikwara lines not as farce, but as a force, as an artistic writing lesson. My hypothesis is that these wavy lines could be

¹Before the publication of the book, Derrida published parts of his analysis in the magazine *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*. It was to this magazine that Lévi-Strauss also sent his response letter (1966).

²Despite not being the focus of this study, another fundamental contribution to understanding the indigenous point of view comes from the studies of writing practices in the Americas, such as Gordon Brotherston’s work (1986, 1992) that proposes a ‘grammatology of the New World’, which I will come back to.
read as the degree zero of the fictional game. That is, they could reveal the structure of what we call fiction, and by extension, art. In such a reading, the structuralist anthropologist is not (only) Lévi-Strauss, but also the Nambikwara chief.

The writing lesson is, then, the scene of origin for my text, and will allow me to think about the performative aspect of fiction from that point of departure. Concerning Lévi-Strauss’s analysis, Derrida commented: ‘But the scene was not the scene of the origin, but only that of the imitation of writing’ (1998 [1967]: 127). In this text, however, I propose re-thinking the scene, not as the scene of imitation, but as the scene of origin of the mimetic game, understood, in Costa Lima’s terms, as a ‘production of difference’, a concept that I relate to the ‘symbolic economy of alterity’ developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. In both authors, the initial base of similarity and equivalence exists to make the difference of alterities speak and appear. The challenge is to think about both of their theories together: to what extent can Costa Lima’s mimetic epistemology be read with the Amerindian ontology of difference? Which mimesis is implied in cannibalism, the incorporation of difference for the non-definition of an identity which is continually (un)produced as the vanishing point of the other? (Viveiros de Castro 2002b) Which ontology is implied in the mimesis of the production of difference? As Costa Lima says, mimetic works ‘produce “beings” in the act of creating them. [Since] mimesis of production has an immediate and eminently performative character’ (1995: 278). The ‘symbolic economy of alterity’, ‘a central sociocosmological operator’ in Amazonian cultures (Viveiros de Castro 1996: 190), has the same performative aspect. In linking both theories, my aim in a larger project is to move forward along lines yet to be demarcated in two principal directions: a reflection on the theoretical bases of an ‘anthropology of fiction’ (Librandi-Rocha 2008); and the development of the concept of ‘writing by ear’, which, from the intersection of writing-orality, seeks to achieve the nucleus of a mimesis that stems not (only) from the eye, the hand, or the mouth, but rather from hearing in writing and listening in literature (Librandi-Rocha 2011b). My intention in this text is to reinterpret the scene between Lévi-Strauss and the indigenous chief to shed light on its potential performative and aural aspects. But before proceeding to this analysis, I will suggest some possible points of interaction that could reveal what kind of philosophy can be deduced from a literary theory that is energized with Amerindian thought. And I will start by clarifying what I mean by occupying a native point of view.

I. A native point of view

Bearing in mind existing studies on indigenous literature and on the representation of indigenous peoples in Western literature, my research takes a parallel but different trajectory: I seek to re-think Western literature through

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3It is worth noting that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro was a student of Luiz Costa Lima’s literary courses, and the latter introduced him to Lévi-Strauss’s work, which was a fundamental element in Costa Lima’s 1970 dissertation, Estruturalismo e Teoria da Literatura.
non-Western theory or, in other words, to rethink non-indigenous literature via indigenous thinking, thereby producing a resonant approximation between the two in order to explore what is produced from this contact. It is an attempt to rethink literature from a native perspective in order to suggest the possibility of making ourselves natives of literature and its worlds, as if it were possible to go over to the ‘other side’ each time we engage in the act of reading (much like the ethnographer does when doing field work). To occupy that native point of view brings into being, then, a paradoxical situation of becoming foreign to our own way of thinking and, at the same time, becoming a native of a foreign way of thinking – thus blurring the lines between the two. To make this activity possible, it is necessary to alter one’s way of writing, to incorporate a degree of fiction into literary criticism and to practice what Australian anthropologists are calling ‘fictocriticism’ (Taussig 1993; Muecke 2008). This movement is necessary not so as to emulate fiction but, rather, to be able to go beyond what reason allows us to think and to achieve, in this way, a decontrolling of what Costa Lima calls ‘the imaginary control’ (1988).

If, anthropologically and anthropophagically, thinking as a native means occupying a foreign point of view regarding one’s own thinking, then the anthropology that is emerging today is that which is producing a decolonization from its own thinking and diving into another series of concepts. This new direction, most prominently proposed by the Brazilian Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the American Roy Wagner, and the British scholar Marilyn Strathern, considers an epistemological equivalence between the worlds that Marshall Sahlins (1976) once qualified as ‘the West and the rest’. What this new anthropology seeks is an equivalence based on the affirmation of a radical difference. Amerindian or Melanesian thought is distinct from our own, they say, not because they have different points of view of the same objects, but because the worlds that they think about are different. Therefore, describing and inscribing that difference is necessary. As Wagner (1981) and Strathern (1999) say, it is not possible to talk about the other using their code, for we are constrained to use our own. It is possible, nonetheless, to try and allow the other to speak through us, crossing us, creating gaps and inversions, interrupting us, and making things appear that we are not capable of seeing or saying. To do this, it is necessary to go through a transformation: to consider another way of thinking that could speak through our mouth in a kind of fictional anthropological experiment or, more pertinently, in the name of a philosophy produced by anthropology. In sum, what this new and extremely complex anthropological theorization is proposing is an epistemological equilibrium between Western thought and thought from other groups extraneous to this tradition, thus producing contact and a comparison based on difference instead of the search for similarities. As the texts of Viveiros de Castro (2002a; 2007) repeatedly state, the question is not about having a different point of view of the same things, but rather in using a different way of thinking to understand other potentialities of things and to experience other imaginings.

For an Amerindian literary theory

Fiction continually produces the possibility and practice of experiencing other imaginaries. However, despite the efforts of our best theorists, why is it so
difficult to think about fiction not as a secondary product but rather as a phenomenon with the right to full existence? It is in relation to this point that I suggest a hypothesis that initially seemed surprising to me: maybe there is a sort of incompossibility between our artistic artifacts and our own epistemology, cosmology, and ontology. If this hypothesis is heuristically valid, why not also suppose that other, different epistemologies, cosmologies, and ontologies could be more akin to our literary texts? In a reductive and general way, what does our ‘modern pop-philosophy’ (which has established striking divisions between nature/culture, physics/metaphysics, text/context), as Viveiros de Castro describes it (2011b), say to us? It says that our literary texts, our fictional objects, are very good – even excellent – although they ultimately create worlds that do not exist and are instead ‘just’ an imaginary representation. As intelligent and rational beings, we know that there is no body there, that symbols are abstractions, and that the world is elsewhere. It would be childish to argue against this matter of facts. We are sorry, but that’s just how it is: life is hard, and the rest is literature. It seems, then, that literature occupies, and is thought of, as a place of excess or, following the image of the concretist poem ‘Luxo/Lixo’ by Augusto de Campos (1965), either it is a luxury (excess understood as leisure) or it is trash (expendable excess concerning what is considered useful). The root of this contempt (or the oscillation between more – and less – worth) derives from this habitual line of thought: we exist, but characters in fiction do not. We are beings of flesh and bone, but they are written on paper. We think, they are the products of thought, of the imagination. We act, they are our projection. We have and we make history, but their (hi)story is a ‘lie’.

However, it just so happens that there is a different way of thinking in the Amerindian and Amazonic world. A thinking that advocates perspectivism (which is not the same as relativism) and multinaturalism (the opposite of multiculturalism) (Viveiros de Castro 1998). This way of thinking is closely related to the imaginary world of fiction as well as to what is dreamt of in our best philosophy. The indigenous people’s cosmopolitics, their ways of life and of invention, their concepts that we get to know through Viveiros de Castro’s (among others) ‘experimental construction’, allow, among other possibilities, a reconsideration of the fictional that deserves to be considered alongside the ideas of our best literary theorists. As such, if ‘insurrection and changing begin with the concept’ (Viveiros de Castro 2011a: 7), it could be said that in the field of literary studies it is our way of thinking about fiction that should be continually altered and re-thought. Therefore, what Viveiros de Castro describes as a ‘political ontology of the sensible’ or as ‘ontological perspectivism’ is what I would like to transpose to the field of literary theory. To test the validity of this transfer, I will begin by proposing some analogies.

For the first analogy, I would say that within the Western tradition, literary texts and indigenous groups occupy a similar position. It is possible to situate them as analogous, obviously not because the indigenous ‘does not exist,’ despite their constant silencing, ethnocide and ‘epistomécide’ (Bob Scholte’s expression quoted by Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 116) but because both of them – fictional collectives and indigenous groups – have been thought about in similar ways: either as adornment and exoticism or as...
marginal in relation to true knowledge that always comes from the outside. Outside of fiction, to say what fiction is or is not; or outside of the indigenous group, to describe what they do, but probably do not know. Both would have, then, a captive status with regard to what is outside (‘referent’, ‘reality’ or ‘truth’) and to what had come from the outside (the colonizers). For the second analogy, if this new anthropology proposes radicalizing an equivalency between the anthropologist and the native (Viveiros de Castro 2002a), I then propose radicalizing the equivalency between readers (who are outside literature) and characters (who are inside) as part of a ficto-critical experiment. Radicalizing the equivalency between us and ‘them’ allows us to think about fiction as another culture within our own with which we establish a relationship and which we should respect for its difference.

Continuing with the native-foreign idea, it is as though fictional texts are foreign to us – the very people who create and read them. I suggest, therefore, reading literally the Proustian idea taken up by Deleuze (1997) that literature is written in a foreign language, an idea that was central to the first literary theory (Russian formalism) which posed literary discourse as ‘ostranenie’, or defamiliarization (Shklovskij 1998). As such I seek to radicalize these notions and suggest that we transform ourselves into ethnographers of our own fiction. Produced by us, the poetic voices and characters are our strangers or the stranger that resides within us. They are our potentialities, which we visit and invent just as someone who is capable of inhabiting and dreaming in a foreign language. If, as Roy Wagner writes, ‘every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own’ (1981: 12), I suggest that the invention of fictions is an experiment with our own culture as with another. To think about fiction as another culture forces us to remove fiction from a secondary and subaltern position and to stop ourselves from being its interpreters or ‘colonizers’, to become instead its interlocutors. This is the structure of the philosophy proposed by Viveiros de Castro: consider indigenous people not as objects of study but, rather, as interlocutors so that there might be an effective dialogue (or, revisiting what was said above, so that a philosophy capable of hearing might be created): ‘A dialogic interlocutor but also an antilogical contrary, Amerindian thought is disposed in a tense constitutive relationship with its anthropological description’ (Viveiros de Castro 2011a: 7). I think that this definition can be transferred to the relationship of literary theory with the fictional world, as a dialogic interlocutor and an antilogical contrary in a tense relation with its philosophical and critical description. In the latter case, it is necessary to address the following crucial question: if a character is not a person, how can a relationship of interlocution be established?

Parallel worlds

To think through the concept of ‘Amerindian perspectivism’, the question is not about translating different visions of the world but about understanding the possibility of distinct coexisting worlds. For the field of literary studies, this formulation implies a master stroke in the representation-reality dichotomy that allows us to re-create our relationship with fiction as an invented world that is ontologically conceivable. In this case, it is necessary to further research how Amerindian perspectivism can be joined with the fictional
perspectivism theorized by Wolfgang Iser (1993). As a first approach, we can say that, from the autopoiesis of the creation of possible worlds, fictional perspectivism, in Iser’s terms, performs the duplication of our world through the game initiated by the phrase ‘as if’, which distances and relieves us from habitual constraints in such a way as to allow us access to a differentiated vision. It is a type of enlightenment that makes us re-see life with free eyes. In the Amerindian case, perspectivism does not mean mental representation or a distinct point of view of the same reality, but rather the existence of different realities viewed from the always-human – indeed, too human – point of view. The Amerindian world, according to Viveiros de Castro, is a united world in which semiotics is not separated in the literal-metaphoric system, but in which, rather, every being is related to other beings in a ‘generalized symbolic economy’ based on the process of personification (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 246). In this unified world, there are multiple, simultaneously possible worlds in which beings, plants, animals, characters, spirits, the dead, and gods are all simultaneously present and able to act as agents because each one is a person in its own domain. It is a world of ‘inherent humanity’ (250–251). Each being lives in its own collective, but even so its province (or what is called real) cannot be considered the only true one. As these multiple worlds echo and resonate with one another, one must practice the difficult art of knowing how to hear and access them. Readers of literature recognize this Amerindian multiverse. When we read a poem or a novel we dive into a world in which the real/fiction divide is eliminated, even if only during the time that we are reading – as though we were moved into different but unified worlds in relation.

An important corollary needs to be pointed out here, however: Amerindian societies base themselves on an economy of gifts. Distinct from our world in which things and people assume the form of objects, in the world of the exchange of gifts, things and people both assume the form of people (246). It is, therefore, necessary to consider our ‘objects’ of thought as people. According to Viveiros de Castro, if ‘objects’ are not personified then nothing can be understood and no interlocutionary relationship can be established – rather one of dominance is more likely. As Strathern observes, ‘the very act of interpretation presupposes the personhood of what is being interpreted’ (quoted by Viveiros de Castro 2009: 249). Brazil’s best writers know this. The Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa said: ‘literature has to be life’ (Rosa 1983: 67). And what if we take seriously, as an intellectual prerogative, Rosa’s affirmation? If we take it seriously (and with a little humour) then what happens? It seems that other questions then start to appear: for example, what sort of life does a fictional character lead? An imaginary life configured in the text? Certainly. But what does that mean? It is true that fiction produces beings that do not die. In fact, there is no reason for people to one day stop talking about Romeo and Juliet, about Madame Bovary, about Ribaldo, or about Borges – character and author of himself and others. It is also true that characters cannot alter their already-written destiny, nor their words, but we relate ourselves to them and in our relationship we mutually alter each other. As Wai Chee Dimock (1997) asserts in her important work, a literary text, different from other texts, changes with its readers. This leads her to conceptualize literary discourse as an ‘unstable ontology’. Just think, for
example, about the Quixote of Borges/Pierre Menard: it is not the same as Cervantes’s *Quixote* despite the text being identical. Why not? Because the text changes with time and it resonates with the historical context of the person reading it. This also happens when we read and re-read texts and poems: the fortune or destiny of the characters does not change, and yet with each re-reading the characters appear differently compared with the time before. Why? Perhaps it is necessary to re-describe this impression according to the scope of the ontology of the fictional as a world of latent presences.4

**The relational body of fiction**

In the Amerindian world, to understand the point of view of the other it is necessary to assume their body, to ‘embody’ them. This idea is possible because they do not have a biological concept of the body but, rather, a metamorphical one: like clothes that you put on and take off, a body can change depending on the situation and on the contingent encounters that could provoke a change (Viveiros de Castro 2009). If the Amerindian body is a transformational item or a part of a cosmology in which a jaguar can become my brother-in-law and vice versa, the world of fiction is also — as Karleinz Stierle (2006) defined it — a world marked by metamorphosis, another concept of literary theory that can be repotentialized through Amerindian thought, alongside other concepts such as Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony. In fact, when Amerindian thought is taken seriously and its notions translated into concepts that are epistemologically as valid as notions from Western philosophy, we can adopt its ideas to re-think the world of fiction. It is interesting to note that a similar notion of body is expressed by Clarice Lispector in the fictional game that is established between her and the narrator Rodrigo S. M., in the novel *The Hour of the Star*: ‘For the last three days, alone, without characters, I depersonalize myself and take myself off as if taking off clothes. I depersonalize myself so much that I fall asleep’ (2011: 61). As such, if in the Amerindian world (almost) everything is human but in different bodies, we can then inquire as to what sort of body a fictional character has. Or, what corporeality does our relationship with fiction and poetry involve?5 I am going to propose the following answer to this issue: To speak and to be heard, characters on the page need the bodies of their readers to be able to interact and to create a community in such a way that beings without individual agency can act and have their voices heard. If ‘anthropology is philosophy with the people in’ — as Tim Ingold has it (quoted by Viveiros de Castro 2002a: 127) — then I suggest that literary theory is philosophy with imaginary life reverberating between readers and texts. With these analogies established between theory, fiction and anthropology, I will now go on to read the Nambikwara lines as an inscription that allows us to see the latent possibilities in our relationship with the fictional game.


5I am grateful for these questions as suggested by Roberto Zular.
II. The writing lesson: Lévi-Strauss and the Nambikwara scene

Let me quickly restage the scene narrated in *Tristes Tropiques* (1992 [1955]). It is 1938. Claude Lévi-Strauss finds himself on an expedition to Brazil’s northern plateau, following a stretch of telegraph line that was installed twenty years previously in a region known as ‘sertão’ (‘backlands’). His aim was to encounter the Nambikwara Indians. To have an idea about how many Indians were living in the area he was visiting, Lévi-Strauss persuaded the chief of a group to: ‘. . . [organise] some kind of meeting [in his village] with other groups . . . In this way’, he said, ‘I would be able to gauge the size of a contemporary gathering’ (294). He promised to bring presents and to engage in an exchange of gifts. Finally, 75 people arrived at the village in the evening: ‘Several of the natives appeared never to have seen a white man before’ (296) and there was tension in the air. Compared with other indigenous groups, the Nambikwaras seemed like an ‘infancy of humanity’ (290). These Indians do not know about ceramics, they do not use canoes, nor do they sleep in hammocks, ‘It is unnecessary’, says Lévi-Strauss, ‘to point out that the Nambikwara have no written language, but they do not know how to draw either . . . ’ (296). Nonetheless, before starting the exchange of gifts, there occurred what Lévi-Strauss called an ‘extraordinary incident’. The chief asks for a writing pad and when Lévi-Strauss asked him something:

> he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply . . . [T]here was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher. (296)

When all Indians were reunited to start the exchange of gifts, this same scene repeats itself (as if the first one was a ‘rehearsal’ before the great play in front of the spectators):

> As soon as he had got the company together, he took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects I was to give in exchange for the presents offered to me . . . (296)

Like a theatre play and a performative scene, the chief ‘made a show of reading’. Lévi-Strauss called it a ‘farce’:

> This farce went on for two hours. Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to astonish his companions, to convince them that he was acting as an intermediary agent for the exchange of the goods, that he was in alliance with the white man and shared his secrets. (296)

What is at play in this scene? As we see, apparently the indigenous chief acts as a *tropical trickster in the tristes tropiques* by pretending that he is reading and writing something intelligible in order to show that he has mastered Western knowledge and language by drawing lines on a piece of paper.
Lévi-Strauss does not refuse, but accepts this trickster game that will in turn question the institution of writing. Why? The fake text produces a comedy that makes Lévi-Strauss think critically about writing and thus shows how writing is related to power and to empire: it has ‘not been a question of acquiring knowledge . . . but rather of increasing the authority and prestige of an individual – or function – at the expenses of others’ (298). Lévi-Strauss interprets the scene as the revelation of the (occult) dominant power of written language and its relation to the domination of one group over another for long periods of time, the subjection to the law of the State, and the persistence of slavery and proletarianization. These are the primary functions of writing that the gesture of the indigenous chief revealed. The other functions of writing – the function of producing and storing knowledge, the function of planning the present and the future, and the function of producing aesthetic pleasure – would be secondary functions, often being used to reinforce (rather than criticize) the primary functions. Writing, says Lévi-Strauss, ‘seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment’ (299). And he continues: ‘My hypothesis, if correct, would oblige us to recognise the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery’ (299).

The use of the term ‘function’ by Lévi-Strauss seems to refer to the Prague Linguistic Circle (Prague School), which established function not as a property ‘but a mode of using the properties of a certain phenomenon’ (Mukarovsky quoted by Costa Lima 2002: 43). Derrida would criticize Lévi-Strauss as he placed writing in opposition to supposedly innocent speech, thus reintroducing the ethnocentric divide between peoples who have or do not have writing. But by using the term function we see that Lévi-Strauss is referring to one of the modes of use of writing that, according to him, is much more effective at domination when kept as hidden as possible. Lévi-Strauss condemns the relationship between empire-death-subjection as mediated by the poison-remedy that is writing. As per the aims of this text, concerning Derrida I must limit myself to observing merely that his reading has the great merit of uniting the anthropologist and the native by claiming that the alphabetic script as much as the indigenous lines described in Lévi-Strauss’s tale are both considered to constitute writing (‘écriture’). Both forms are subject to difference, an initial arch-violence that separates us from the absolute vocative of full speech. Nonetheless, if one wants to think about indigenous writing and the native point of view and the different functions they display, then we need to return to Lévi-Strauss’s work. Gordon Brotherston solved this aporia in a pioneering essay in which he analyzes the opposition between Lévi-Strauss and Derrida. He suggests using the best of both thinkers in the field of Amerindian writing studies, thereby creating ‘a possible grammatology (Derrida) of America (Lévi-Strauss)’. And he affirms: ‘In the first place this involves firmly establishing the New World as a term in its own right, beyond its role as a mere correlative for European philosophy. Few have done this better than Lévi-Strauss . . . ’ (1986: 203). As I will now propose,

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6I am referring here to the proverb cited by Lévi-Strauss in the same chapter: ‘cemetery, jail, and cachaça are not for just one person’.
Lévi-Strauss and his analysis of the writing lesson can be rethought as a lesson that is useful to a literary theory of the fictional.

**Art’s gesture**

If the ‘Writing Lesson’ is generally considered to teach us that the primary function of writing is to subordinate and subject, my objective is to show that this same lesson teaches something else. Lévi-Strauss understood the scene between him and the indigenous chief as a ‘farce’, a ‘staging’, and a ‘theatre’. For him, the indigenous chief produces an imitation, the aim of which is to increase his power over the group. In my reading, I propose to perceive the mimetic potential of this scene – or what this scene can teach us about mimetic function. My question is: how can we read these lines of the page not in relation to what they reveal about the imitation of the power of writing, but instead what they reveal concerning artistic performance? In other words: what kind of mimesis is involved in the ‘farce’, as played out by the indigenous chief who pretends to write in front of the anthropologist? Is it only an imitation, and a failed copy, or would it be exaggerated to say that the markings get the mimetic machine working? As I have already said, my hypothesis is that this scene can be read as the degree zero of the mimetic game, allowing us to remember some of the most subtle aspects involved in the aesthetic experience.

The alphabetic writing condemned by Lévi-Strauss is re-cast in another mode of writing, that of inscription in the scene of the exchange. The fact is that this false written text produced by the chief puts true writing into question or questions the truth of writing. The trick of the indigenous ‘trickster’ undermines the foundations of writing. He pretends to be the anthropologist’s equal and to have the same ability to decipher letters, but his gesture produces a difference in the receiver: the awareness of the farce. As such, the text without letters questions the ‘frame’ of the lettered culture through comic subversion. I wish to propose, furthermore, that art’s birth came from a similar drive to the one that produced this indigenous gesture. Artistic mimesis has this gesture as its archetype: it starts as copy but a distinct product is the result; from an initial basis of similarity, a difference is produced. Here, the chief’s gesture creates the semantic instability which compels Lévi-Strauss’s interpretative effort during his moments of insomnia: ‘Being still perturbed by this stupid incident, I slept badly and whiled away the sleepless hours by thinking over the episode of the exchange of gifts’ (1986: 297). The dream of the indigenous chief (to write like the white visitor) interrupted the anthropologist’s dogmatic slumber and aroused the criticism of his culture of origin.

**Poetry and aesthetic experience**

In his essay ‘Poetry and aesthetic experience’ (2002), Luiz Costa Lima understands the difficulty we have in defining poetry as a difficulty inherent to poetry itself. A poem, he says, implies an experience that eliminates the distance between subject and object and at the same time produces a distance from the self, which means that the self is experienced as an other, for poetry is substantially an anti-narcissistic movement. To define poetry it is necessary therefore to reflect on how we experience poetry. It is in relation
to this difficult exercise that Costa Lima’s text offers us some key ideas. The first of these ideas, which I would like to highlight, affirms that aesthetic experience implies ‘the provisional suspension of the semantic empire’ (46–47).

In our daily lives, we are subjects to the ‘semantic empire’: it is necessary for us to understand the messages that we are constantly receiving and sending in order for life to function and to avoid chaos. Nonetheless, in order for the aesthetic experience to occur, it is vital that, for a moment – just for a moment – a little bit of chaos sets in and a small crisis occurs. This break is the moment of semantic suspension when we are alleviated of the weight of messages and communication, and when we feel a sort of suspension. This suspension occurs and lasts for only a short period of time, and this moment occurs when a certain syntactic configuration attracts our attention and distracts us from meaning – making us feel, for a moment, suspended in the abyss. When this short break happens, Costa Lima explains, we are confronted with the limits of the known and are on the edge of the unknown (we don’t need to understand the exact meaning of a verse to feel its beauty). The aesthetic experience thus generates a crisis because it shows us the limits of reason and how an experience can bring about penetration into something that reason does not allow us to comprehend. In this way, the aesthetic experience consists of a movement from a moment of suspension to a moment of suspicion (understood as the posterior semantic re-occupation through a critical interpretative re-approximation).

I would like to adopt this incisive insight into the aesthetic experience as a moment of suspension followed by a moment of suspicion, and then to highlight these three other passages: (1) the aesthetic experience is comparable with ‘a loss of weight, provoked by any event that makes us lose the sense of orientation for a while’ (Costa Lima 2002: 48); (2) ‘the arts are the sole discursive form . . . where communication is not the primordial vector’ (50); and (3) ‘its vitality resides in the answer that it provokes, not in the message that it transmits’ (47). With these ideas in mind, let us return to the scene between the anthropologist and the indigenous chief.

With regard to the idea of suspension and the suspicion, the indigenous chief’s wavy lines constitute an excess in relation to the moment of semantic suspension, as there is no inscribed message in these lines. It is not a poem, nor a design or drawing. Lévi-Strauss sees the lines and imagines a meaning (bows to be exchanged for machetes, for example) in relation to which the indigenous chief will say yes or no, and that sort of enactment goes on for two hours. By producing the excess of the ‘suspension of the semantic empire’, the lines generate a crisis, which in turn creates the ‘lesson’. Lévi-Strauss learns something important about writing, something that had never before appeared with such clarity; not being able to sleep, he revisits the scene and semantically re-occupies it through a generalized critique about the dominant function of writing.

In relation to the idea of losing one’s sense of orientation, it is clear that this is exactly what happened to Lévi-Strauss soon after the ‘extraordinary incident’: ‘Suddenly, . . . I found myself alone in the bush, with no idea which way to go’ (1992 [1955]: 297). As such, the ‘grotesque’ scene of the chief writing follows the ‘stupid’ scene of the lost anthropologist. Lévi-Strauss loses his donkey, his
weapons and his photographic equipment. He then hears the voices of two Nambikwaras who ‘had been following my trail’ and who had followed him: ‘for them, finding my equipment was child’s play’ (297). The indigenous people, then, do not know how to write but they know how to follow lines and marks on the ground or the earth, an interaction that in itself would merit a separate analysis.

As for the second and third aspects of this analysis – that art does not have communication as its principal vector and that its vitality resides in the response that it provokes – we can say that the wavy lines of the Nambikwara indigenous chief are ‘extraordinary’ not in themselves but by the answer they provoke or elicit. These marks are extraordinary because they ask for a performative interaction between both actors – Lévi-Strauss and the indigenous chief – in order to produce a result together. Without this interaction there is no ‘show’, there is no ‘play’. Lévi-Strauss pretends to read and read out loud; the indigenous chief pretends to write; and in the collaborative juncture of the two, the writing lesson occurs as a performative action. In this sense, it is the space of silence and emptiness in art (here represented by the drawing of wavy lines) that makes the voices surrounding the text function.

**Resonance**

Lévi-Strauss says that there was a tacit understanding between him and the indigenous chief about the fact that they were representing a play based on a (mute) script. It is possible to say that these lines were ‘directing’ their interaction through an ‘imagined text’ that is not written anywhere. It is pure silence reverberating. It is a gesture, an undulatory gesture that I can compare to the way we draw or represent sound waves. I can therefore say that these marks represent the degree zero of the aesthetic experience if we consider the degree zero of poetry or of fiction as nothing more and nothing less than a reverberation or the resonance of a movement. It is this aspect that I am interested in developing in order to be able to describe the subtle effect of fictional characters in a text: the impression that we ‘hear’ their voices. We cannot hear them, but it is as if it were possible. This effect (or desire) is translated by the gesture of the indigenous chief who hopes to hear something from these lines that he himself put on the page. Lévi-Strauss tells us that the chief hoped for something of a sonic response from those lines and that he felt deceived by their muteness. He had hoped to receive a return of sound, a voice telling him something: ‘He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face’ (1992 [1955]: 296). When we read fiction, we are immersed in a similar expectation. Fictional characters do not have a voice. They have no body and they do not speak. But when we read a novel or a story or a poem, their muteness reverberates in the silence in our mind. The implicit voice, ‘cosa mentale’ or ‘voces paginarum’ as medieval monks would say, murmurs in our ear, or at least has the effect of a murmuring, of a lament, or of a plea. To speak and be heard, the character on a page needs the active performance of the readers who are required to interact, to create a community so that this being without a voice can speak. This magic
of co-optation is produced by the written fictional text more than any other text. We are taken into this bottomless world of the pure superficiality of letters, and those written forms are brought to life by the act of reading.

This sonorous, aural aspect of mimesis appears in Costa Lima’s essay ‘Poetry and Aesthetical Experience’ at two very important moments. At the beginning of his text, a verse from Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘Pieces’ is quoted as an epigraph. It reads: ‘There is a sense in sounds beyond their meaning’ (2002: 39). Then, almost at the end of his text, Costa Lima illustrates the quality of a poetic image by quoting Osip Mandelstam who says that the eye is an ‘acoustic organ’; in other words, ‘eyes are capable of hearing’ (53). In his book Lines, Tim Ingold discusses ‘how the page lost its voice’. He quotes a story reported by the anthropologist Peter Gow among the Piro, a tribe from Peruvian Amazon: ‘The story concerns one individual, Sangama, reputed to be the first Piro man who could read’ (Ingold 2007: 34). This indigenous man described reading as follows: “I know how to read the paper”. . . “It speaks to me”. . . “The paper has a body . . . ”. According to Ingold, another indigenous group, the Panoans, ‘use the charming expression that “the paper is talking to [them]”’ (34, 36), and he concludes:

for the modern Western reader . . . the paper is no more than a screen upon which are projected graphic images of verbal sound. Sangama, however, did not see images of sounds; he saw the spoken sounds themselves, as they were addressed directly to him. He was listening with his eyes . . . (36–37)

Apparently, both poets (like Mandelstam) and these indigenous people have a similar relationship to reading and writing as listening. Reverberation and resonance are important in understanding the effect of the enchantment produced by the fictional literary text, as the mana that emanates from the written page and produces ‘the magic voice of a book’ (Menard 2011: 68).

Conclusion

If this ‘extraordinary event’ is comparable with an aesthetic experience, I can now reverse the direction and say that aesthetic experience is comparable with the encounter between an anthropologist and a native. This encounter means leaving your acquired knowledge on the side – for a while – and connecting yourself to someone or something that escapes your knowledge. In this encounter you need to confront yourself with an unknown; it is necessary to experience otherness and to suffer a metamorphosis. Similarly, proposes Costa Lima, the mimetic impulse in art corresponds to a process of transformation or of metamorphosis according to an appeal and an impulse for the unknown: ‘if the work of mimesis fascinates it is because it blatantly states what it does not know’ (1995: 254). Finally, in this meeting with the unknown, art produces the distance from the self (255) that is an anti-narcissistic moment. As such, he says, the basic impulse of mimesis in art is that of experiencing self as other’, which implies ‘a process of experiencing and experimenting with alterity, still fascinating and unknown’ (254). And he concludes with a crucial phrase: ‘In front of the mirror, from the point of the view of sense or
meaning, *mimesis is a mirage* (255). Finally, if this hypothesis works, we can think about the Nambikwara writing not as a failed copy of Western writing but rather as a different kind of inscription – which the West would also produce in its fictions, and that deals with potentialities, with latencies, and with silences: ‘In the discourses of mimesis, . . . the un-representable is always latent, always on the verge of being able to thematize itself’ (286). Precisely because it does not produce a copy or an imitation, the mimetic game opens the possibility of a difference emerging from the production of a mirage, which I translate as reverberation and resonance. This is the indigenous lesson of Amerindian mimesis. In the silence of the chief’s markings are inscribed a differential that challenge our thinking.

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**References**


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